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Making enterprise happen

Phil Race

Employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship

In recent years, several higher education institutions have addressed the development of these attributes in students alongside their subject-related studies. The work of the National Council for Graduate Entrepreneurship tracks many of these developments, and can be accessed via <http://www.ncge.com/home.php>. In times of recession, these are qualities that are likely to be needed to move us back towards prosperity.

It is very clear that we can't develop these qualities for our students – only they can do this, just as we can't make sense of subject matter for students: it's something they need to do, with our help. It is also clear that developing enterprise skills and entrepreneurship qualities is not likely to be achieved in a 'conformist' environment such as produced by subject-related benchmarking, and that we need to allow students the time and space to learn these skills by trial and error, with plenty of feedback, and (above all) by a great deal of interpersonal interaction between students, with tutors, and (more important perhaps) with real-life entrepreneurs from outside the relatively conservative confines of higher education.

As ever, when learning is driven substantially by assessment, we face the challenging task of designing assessment processes and instruments that will serve as targets to students, so that they develop their enterprise and entrepreneurship qualities along the way. In other words, if we really want students to develop enterprise skills and attitudes, we have to reward them in our assessment systems, and value risk-taking, rather than rewarding conformity. By the very nature of enterprise, however, there are no 'right' answers to assess, and our traditional assessment methods are far from fit for purpose as means of measuring such qualities.

Perhaps if a future version of an instrument such as the National Student Survey should probe final-year students' experiences of the extent to which their courses helped them to develop enterprise and entrepreneurship, we would see much greater attention paid by institutions to providing students with the opportunity, time, space and feedback needed to achieve these qualities alongside their other studies.

Seven factors underpinning the successful development of enterprise

In Race (2010, in press) I link seven factors underpinning successful learning to many aspects of teaching, assessment and feedback, and in this paper I sketch out the principal links between these factors and the development of enterprise skills and attributes. All seven of the factors below can be considered to link strongly to helping students to develop these qualities.

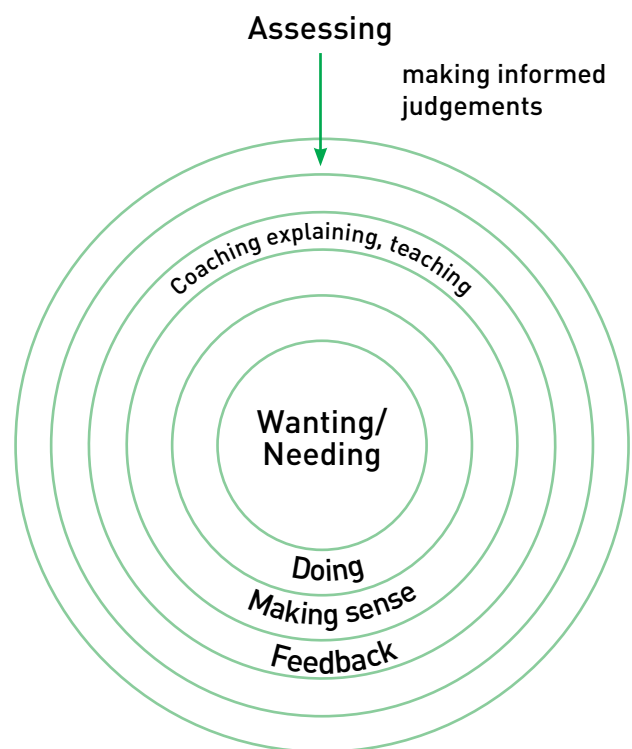


Figure 1: Seven factors underpinning the development of enterprise

1. Wanting to become enterprising

When students want this, it's a very good start. This kind of attitude links closely to the sort of motivation employers value. Getting students to think consciously about their wish to become enterprising during their studies paves the way to them being conscious of their own driving forces in general, and helps them to remain more aware of what they desire in employment. This, in turn, helps them quickly to communicate their ambitions both to prospective employers at interview – helping to secure a job in the first place – and to their actual employers when in post – helping them perhaps to justify some training or development they would like, or indeed to secure promotion as 'someone who knows their own mind' and takes responsibility for their own progression.

2. Needing to become enterprising

Even when students don't *want* to become enterprising, we can do a lot to move them in the right direction by helping them take ownership of the *need* to do so. We can provide them with suitable targets, and help them to see how useful it will be for them to reach these targets. Working towards targets is necessary in the day-to-day life of being employed. Working towards other people's targets, in particular, is very important in the early stages of any post. Skills gained working out what intended learning outcomes actually boil down to in practice are usefully extended to breaking overall targets in employment into achievable, manageable steps. Enterprise and entrepreneurship could be regarded as including helping students to set new targets, and plan how to reach them. Enterprise could also be regarded as linking to resilience in the context of steadfastly taking ownership of the need to reach 'imposed' targets.

3. Learning by *being* enterprising

Students learn by doing – practice, trial-and-error, repetition. We're good at getting students learning by doing, but perhaps not good enough yet at making that doing link to enterprise. Any job can be regarded as an extension of practice, repetition, learning through mistakes, and so on. If we can help learners to be more conscious of the enterprise nature of their learning by doing, they are likely to remain so as they move into employment, and continue to be more willing and able to 'have a go' at new problems, even when some trial and error will be involved.

4. Making sense of enterprise

This is about students 'getting their heads around' the whole business of going about learning in enterprising ways. We can do a lot by helping learners become aware of how best they achieve enterprise, paving the way for them to become better at it during employment. The more conscious they are of what works best for them in getting their heads round new scenarios and concepts, the better they can take charge of understanding the employment contexts they find themselves in, and the less likely they are to rush into things, having only thought through the consequences at a superficial level.

5. Learning enterprise through feedback

Learning through feedback is perhaps the most important of the factors underpinning successful learning. We know, however, not least from the National Student Survey, that students remain dissatisfied with our efforts to give them feedback on their learning. So we need to make sure that they get more and better feedback, not only from us but also from each other. We need to help them become better 'receivers' of feedback, as well as becoming more focused on providing it. Employers value highly the skills of good listeners. However, receptive listeners are those who take feedback on board rapidly and easily, and adjust their actions accordingly. Similarly, the skills of giving feedback constructively are very important in work-based contexts, and employees who experience least difficulty in supervising other employees are all the more valued by employers. Resilience remains a vital dimension of enterprise, and links very strongly to becoming skilled at receiving feedback well, and giving it sensitively.

6. Developing enterprise through explaining, coaching and teaching

We know as teachers how much we deepen our own learning every time we teach, in particular the very first time we teach something. We can help our students develop enterprise qualities by getting them to explain things to each other, coaching each other, and even teaching each other. Skills students gain through these processes are very close to the skills needed for employability, and vital for many particular kinds of job. We can do a great deal to develop students' communication and interpersonal skills by giving them time, space and reason to deepen their learning in these ways. Especially in the context of developing enterprise skills, this does sometimes mean that we as tutors should step back from the temptation to do most of the explaining, coaching and

teaching, and realise that while it may be somewhat slower to allow learners to do this with each other, the end results are much more profound.

7. Learning enterprise through assessing – making informed judgements

Making informed judgements is one of the fastest ways of deepening learning. The payoff resulting from involving learners in self- and peer-assessment of enterprise-related skills and attitudes has huge relevance to developing these skills quickly and deeply. People who have the ability to assess their own activities during the doing of them are likely to do a much better job. Practice gained through peer-assessment not only develops judgement-related skills, but also the accompanying interpersonal and communication skills to convey these judgements effectively and sensitively to fellow-employees in workplace environments.

Overall, learners who become skilled at learning enterprisingly, and good at consciously reflecting about their own learning, are in a strong position to continue to develop as enterprising individuals long after leaving education. Equipping learners to be able to get the most from their brains paves their way towards lifelong learning: employers value 'a good learner' possibly more than anything else. Therefore, when a primary purpose of higher education is to equip students for their future careers, there is nothing better we can do for them than help them to take conscious control of how they learn best, and to become well-practised in exercising key enterprise, communication and interpersonal skills during their time with us. We should design our curriculum intentionally as a vehicle for students to develop in these ways, and not just hope that this development will occur alongside the curriculum. Furthermore, we need to allow learners opportunities to 'step out of the box of higher education' and exercise their own minds in ways that prepare them to be enterprising and entrepreneurial. There is a great deal we can do to make enterprise happen for our students – and indeed for ourselves.

Reference

Race, P. (2010, in press) *Making Learning Happen: a guide for post-compulsory education* (2nd edn). London: Sage Publications.

Phil Race

Emeritus Professor, Assessment, Learning and Teaching